

# Study shows standing up for beliefs in face of group opposition is worth the effort

August 18 2016, by Bert Gambini

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Going with the flow might appear easier than sticking up for yourself when confronted with unanimous disagreement.

But a new study from the University at Buffalo that assessed bodily responses suggests that standing up for your beliefs, expressing your opinions and demonstrating your core values can be a positive psychological experience.

There can be a clear divergence between what people do and say and how they feel, according to Mark Seery, an associate professor in UB's Department of Psychology.

"People can show conformity, but going along with the group doesn't mean they're going along happily," he says. "The external behavior isn't necessarily a good indication of their internal experience."

The findings, published in the journal *Psychophysiology*, provide new insights into what it's like being alone against the group, investigating the experience as it happens.

Methodologically this is a hard thing to capture, according to Seery.

He says there is a long tradition in social psychology investigating how people are affected by pressure to conform to a group. The vast majority of the work has focused on behavior and self-reported attitudes, with the assumption that it's uncomfortable being the lone dissenter, and that people are motivated to conform because it relieves their discomfort.

Questioning study subjects during the experience can be disruptive, while waiting to interview them later demands that they recall feelings that aren't always accurately reported.

"But we can tap into the experience using psychophysiological measures, which is what we did in this case by assessing cardiovascular responses," says Seery. "That's where this study started. To try to understand what that momentary experience of conformity pressure is like."

By measuring cardiovascular responses, Seery and the other researchers – UB colleague Shira Gabriel, Daemen College's Shannon Lupien and Southern Illinois University's Mitsuru Shimizu – get a sense for how people are evaluating personal resources versus the demands of the situation while in the act of potentially conforming.

When trying to reach a goal, evaluating high resources and low demands leads to a mostly positive, invigorating experience called challenge,

which corresponds with feeling confident. Low resources and high demands lead to a much less confident state called threat, which may produce feelings of anxiety.

The researchers assigned participants into one of four experimental conditions, each with a goal to either fit in with a group's political opinion or assert their individuality, and with a group that either agreed or disagreed with participants' opinion on the issue.

"When participants' goal was to fit in with a group of people who disagreed with them, their cardiovascular responses were consistent with a psychological threat state," says Seery. "In contrast, when the goal was to be an individual among a group of [people](#) who disagreed with them, their cardiovascular responses were consistent with challenge.

"You may have to work to reach a goal, but when you experience challenge, it is more like feeling invigorated than overwhelmed. It is consistent with seeing something to gain rather than focusing on what can be lost," he says.

The results have interesting implications, especially in an election year, when someone can be surrounded by family members, coworkers or even neighborhood lawn signs that run contrary to personal opinions.

"It could easily be overwhelming to face a [group](#) on the other side of an issue or candidate, but this study suggests that reminding yourself of wanting to be an individual can make it a better experience, challenging instead of threatening, invigorating instead of overwhelming," says Seery.

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Study shows standing up for beliefs in face of group opposition is worth the effort (2016, August 18) retrieved 11 August 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-beliefs-group-opposition-worth-effort.html>

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